

SKILLED SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR-INDUSTRY WORKERS FROM NEW MEXICO

by

Charles P. and Nellie H. Loomis¹

The great exodus of Spanish-Americans which has taken almost one-half of the men and boys of working age from rural New Mexican villages has been described in a companion report.² Most of these migrants from the rural villages are in the armed forces or are engaged in what they call "defense work" - constructing army cantonments and air fields - and similar types of war activity. Many of these rural villagers will learn trades and mechanical skills. The present report deals with another group of Spanish-speaking migrants - those graduated from the New Mexico Schools for Vocational Training for War Production. The trainees who have been placed number approximately 3,500³ and have practically all become skilled welders, mechanics, and other craftsmen now actively participating in the war effort.

Skilled Workers Made by the War and the Depression. For the future welfare of the 1-1/2 million Spanish-speaking people living in Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas, most of whom are unskilled wage laborers, it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of their recent mass entrance into the skilled occupations. Throughout the history of the Nation all ethnic groups which, like the Irish, began their existence as laborers achieved higher status through the gradual acquisition of skills. The present wages received by the Spanish-speaking people in skilled occupations in war industries, if intelligently used, should do much to give them status in the American community which places a high value on economic well being. Many of the letters from trainees have carried tones of home-

sickness but there were indications that the trainees were proud that their skills were in demand.

During the depression many of the villagers and town people of New Mexico learned some skills through the programs of Works Progress Administration, National Youth Administration, and Civilian Conservation Corps and many of those possessing such skills went directly into war industries and defense work. Among the Spanish-speaking people no stigma was attached to participating in these programs. A WPA job was thought of as any other Government employment, and NYA and CCC participants were envied by their fellows.⁴ Frequently boys returned to their villages after such work and tried out their acquired skills in laying stone walls or making or repairing tools.

The Vocational Training for War Production. - The present study deals with a sample taken from the Spanish-speaking men who were graduated from New Mexico's Vocational Training Schools located in Las Cruces, Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Las Vegas, Clovis, Hobbs, and Clayton, and are now working in occupations outside the armed forces. These schools are part of a general vocational-training program carried on in all States through the Federal Office of Education in the Department of Interior to which appropriations of approximately \$90,000,000 have been made for this purpose. In New Mexico the welding, shopwork, and other manual training courses are carried on through the colleges and high schools. A number of the instructors are Spanish-Americans, several being from Mexico.

1. Acknowledgments are due the Social Science Research Council for a grant-in-aid without which this report would not have been made.
2. Charles P. Loomis, "Wartime Migration from the Rural Spanish Speaking Villages of New Mexico" *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 7, No. 4, Dec. 1942.
3. The 3,500 figure was obtained in conference with Training School officials in Santa Fe in September. Records studied by investigators indicated that the estimate of the number of Spanish-American graduates was probably too great. From available records of 1,865 trainees the authors calculated that 43 per cent of the graduates from the schools who wrote back about their placements were Spanish-Americans. However, those of Spanish mother tongue may have been less inclined to write. Probably more than one-half of the trainees were Spanish-speaking. One official estimated that three-fourths of the 5,000 graduates who had been placed from the New Mexico Vocational Training Schools were Spanish-American.
4. Olen Leonard and Charles P. Loomis, "Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community El Cerrito, New Mexico," U.S. Dept. Agr. Rural Life Studies No. 1, November 1941. (Processed.)

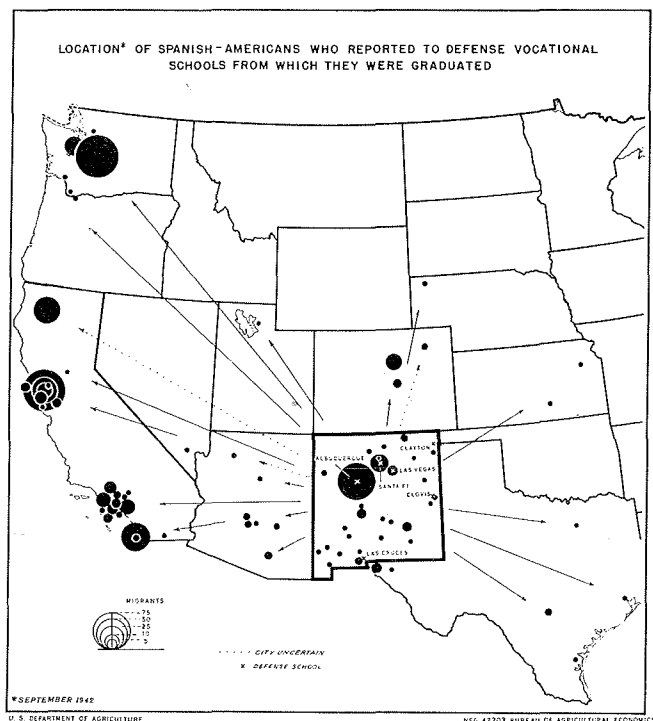


Figure 1. Of the trainees who reported to the schools from which they received their training, 64 per cent were working in California, 20 per cent in Washington State and 9 per cent in New Mexico. The four largest "defense schools", officially known as Schools for Vocational Training for War Production, are located in Albuquerque, Las Vegas, Santa Fe and at State College near Las Cruces. Schools located at Hobbs, Clayton, and Clovis were very small. Reports from the small schools at Gallup, Raton and Silver City were not available for analysis, and are, therefore, not shown on the figure.

Most of the Spanish-American trainees who entered the schools were WPA laborers or participants in the NYA programs in the State. Generally, in New Mexico the trainees who were sent by the WPA to schools located in towns other than those where they lived received \$90 per month during their 6 week period of training. Those residing in the town where training schools were located received \$62.40 per month. NYA trainees received \$24 monthly. Upon completion of the training courses, many were transferred to the WPA rolls of the State of California in order that part of the cost of placement might be borne by the government. In recent

months since the demand for trainees has been very great, the schools themselves have placed many men. Some New Mexico WPA clients who were transferred to California rolls were hired upon arrival in that State before they could report to the California WPA office.⁵

When each trainee left his school he was given a franked card upon which to report concerning his placement. The authors visited the four larger schools in Albuquerque, Las Vegas, Santa Fe, and State College to tabulate data from these cards. Placements from the other schools, all of which were small, were studied in the State Office in Santa Fe. Data concerning rates of pay and type and location of work were tabulated from the cards. Of course, many trainees did not report and there is no way of knowing how this element of selection biased the sample.

Present Location of Trainees. - The geographical distribution of workers who did not enter the armed forces is represented in figure 1. Sixty-four per cent went to California, 20 per cent to Washington State, and 9 per cent remained in New Mexico. Most of those working on the Pacific Coast are engaged in the shipyards and airplane factories. Elsewhere they are employed in many capacities as skilled laborers.

Wages Received. - Some workers reported their hourly wage rates; others their monthly rates. The sample of 164 for whom monthly wage data were available are receiving an average of \$148, the lowest wage being \$30 and the highest, \$288. The sample of 144 for whom hourly rates were available are receiving an average of 85 cents; the lowest reported rate is 30 cents, the highest, \$1.37. As stated previously, only a portion of those placed reported their wages. On logical grounds it may be assumed that these wages are higher than those received by the group as a whole because former trainees who were receiving good wages might take pride in reporting them, those receiving low wages might not care to report. However, some might be induced to report in the thought that they might thereby get better jobs. At any rate, the significance of these wages becomes apparent when it is recognized that most of these people were either WPA laborers or youths who have never before held responsible positions.

Characteristics of Trainees in War Industries. - The sample of the 194 trainees who reported their ages averaged 27 years in age, the youngest was 17, the oldest 44. The average school grade completed by

⁵ Fewer WPA workers are being sent to the schools now than in preceding months. In September 1942 New Mexico WPA rolls carried only 4,000 names as compared with 20,000 a year before.

BIRTH PLACES OF 724 TRAINEES FROM 4 NEW MEXICO SCHOOLS FOR VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR WAR PRODUCTION

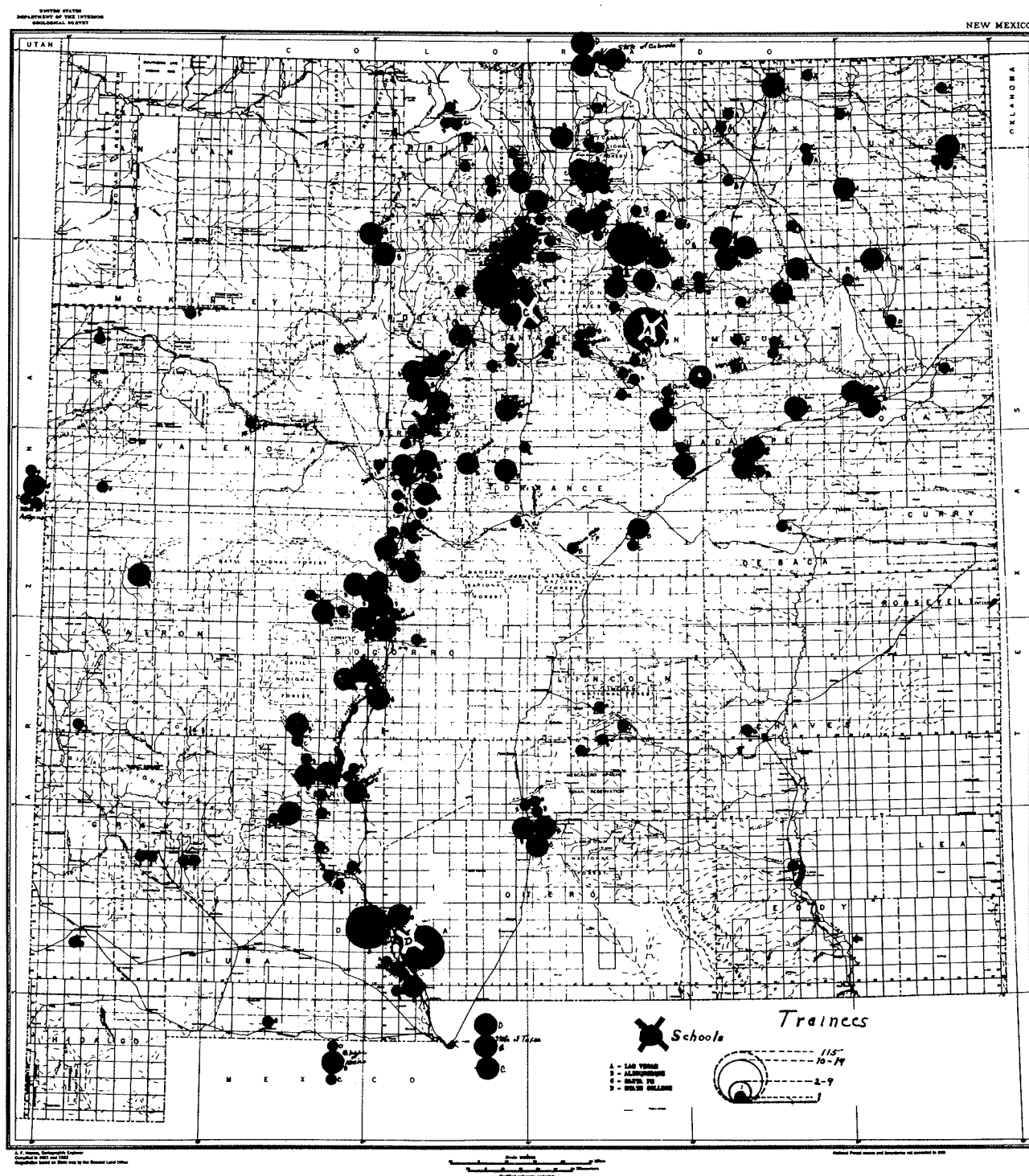


Figure 2. Most of the trainees were born in the small villages of New Mexico. The percentages born in Albuquerque, Las Vegas, Las Cruces and Santa Fe, the larger places where the most important schools were located, were 16, 10, 2 and 2, respectively.

workers included in the sample of 290 for which data were available was 9.4 with a range from 2 grades to a college degree.

The gross correlation coefficient between wages received and grades completed in school before starting the vocational training indicated no significant relationship for the group for which such data were available. The same lack of relationship existed between ages and wages received. Apparently, either training in the public schools of New Mexico did not prepare the workers for their vocational training and work, and/or at present employment does not reward competency with higher wages. The public non-vocational schools of rural New Mexico have been criticized adversely for their failure to prepare students for life and work.⁶ This study does not contradict this criticism.

Origin of Workers. - Most of the trainees were born in the rural villages of the State (figure 2). Their statements concerning their residences as recorded on the application cards are misleading. Most of the trainees reported that they lived in the larger centers of Albuquerque, Las Vegas, Las Cruces, and Santa Fe. However, as calculated from the 724 for whom place of birth data were available, only the following percentages respectively were born in these centers: 16, 10, 2, and 2. Many had moved from the rural villages to these towns and cities earlier to participate in Government programs.

Summary. - By September 1942 the 9 schools for Vocational Training for War Industries in New Mexico had graduated approximately 3,500 Spanish-speaking males who were engaged in skilled trades in wartime activities. Over two-thirds of these former trainees are located on the West Coast. Average hourly wages of 85 cents and average monthly wages of \$148 were reported. Most of the skilled workers who were placed outside the armed forces were born in rural villages.

Comment by Author

Applied Anthropological Problems. - As the Spanish-speaking men are incorporated into the working forces of airplane factories and ship building companies many organizational problems arise. There are Anglos from Texas and elsewhere who want to draw a caste color line between themselves and Negroes and all people of Spanish-mother tongue from the Southwest. At first some private firms did not want to hire the Spanish-speaking people fearing their administrative problems would be increased, but shortage of men and the performance of the New Mexico trainees on the job have opened most of the gates. However, some officials from the schools claimed the Spanish-speaking men were less likely to resist the temptation to leave their jobs and return to their homes than Anglos. These officials also claimed that Spanish-American trainees from Northern New Mexico learned their skills more readily and stayed on their jobs longer than those from Southern New Mexico. Explanations of these phenomena as given by the Anglo officials who made these assertions were usually reflections of their own ethnocentrism. However, these and other organizational problems call for anthropological and sociological research in order that plant and school organizations can be made to train and work different groups together more efficiently.

Another problem of vital importance is that of testing the candidates for training. A very large proportion of the students who begin their courses in Vocational Training for War Production never finish. As indicated, previous schooling is not an effective criterion of candidates' potential mechanical abilities. Millions of dollars could be saved and a more efficient production force created if improved methods of recruitment and training of skilled workers could be developed.

6. C. D. Bohannon, "Report on Survey of Chacon, New Mexico Community," Auspices of the Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Mimeographed, January, 1928; G. I. Sanchez, "Forgotten People," University of New Mexico Press, 1940 Albuquerque, N. Mex.; and Olen Leonard and Charles P. Loomis, *Op. Cit.*